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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001016

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KNNP](#) [ABLD](#) [AG](#) [IR](#) [IS](#) [US](#) [SOFA](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON FOREIGN MINISTER
BEDJAOUI

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Ambassador conducted his first official call May 21 on Foreign Minister Mohammed Bedjaoui, who was appointed May 1 in place of former Fonmin Belkhadem (septel reports their discussion of an exercise-specific SOFA). The conversation covered U.S.-Algerian relations and a possible Bedjaoui visit to Washington; the June 21-22 international conference on Iraq; Prime Minister Ouyahia's acceptance of an invitation to visit Rabat on the same dates as the Iraq conference; and Iran's and Israel's nuclear programs. Throughout the conversation, Bedjaoui presented himself as a friend of the United States. We expect that he will be much easier to work with than his predecessor. End summary.

POSSIBLE VISIT TO WASHINGTON

2. (U) Ambassador, accompanied by DCM, paid an introductory call on newly appointed Foreign Minister Mohammed Bedjaoui May 21. Acting Americas Director General Benmokhtar and member of the Minister's office Benguerah also attended the meeting. Ambassador warmly congratulated Bedjaoui on his new appointment and, after reading it aloud in French translation, delivered Secretary Rice's letter of congratulations to Bedjaoui. Speaking personally, Ambassador urged the Foreign Minister to make plans to visit Washington before long, without waiting for an invitation. It was important to renew channels of communication with senior U.S. officials, and there was great competition these days. Bedjaoui expressed appreciation for the Secretary's letter, commenting that U.S.-Algerian relations were "excellent." He said he was still studying the files and becoming familiar with the Ministry, but he noted that he had not had much contact with U.S. officials since he had been Algeria's UN Ambassador from 1979-82. Bedjaoui said he would be very pleased to consider a visit after he had settled into his new position.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON IRAQ JUNE 21-22

3. (C) Ambassador mentioned the international conference on Iraq that the U.S. and EU will co-host in Brussels June 21-22. Bedjaoui reacted positively, saying it was a good sign that the U.S. and EU finally were working together on stabilizing Iraq. He noted that he had gone to the airport to meet Iraqi President Talabani when the latter's plane had made a refueling stop en route to the Arab-Latin American summit in Brazil. Talabani, whom Bedjaoui described as "impressive," had been even more preoccupied with Iraq's economic situation than he was with terrorism. Without confirming the level of its participation, Bedjaoui said Algeria would definitely participate in the conference "at an appropriately senior level."

PM OUYAHIA VISIT TO RABAT JUNE 21-22

4. (C) In discussing the June 21-22 dates of the Brussels conference, Bedjaoui volunteered that Prime Minister Ouyahia would travel to Rabat to meet with Moroccan Prime Minister Jettou and to resume the work of the joint commissions. He indicated he may accompany Ouyahia. (Comment: Over the weekend, Moroccan Ambassador Benrayane told Ambassador they had extended an invitation to the prime minister to visit June 21-22. At a May 21 reception hosted by the Foreign Minister, Ambassador passed on to Benrayane Bedjaoui's comment about Ouyahia going to Morocco June 21-22. Benrayane said that was the first they had heard their invitation had been accepted.)

IRANIAN AND ISRAELI NUCLEAR PROGRAMS

5. (C) Bedjaoui then asked for Ambassador's sense of the Iranian nuclear issue. Ambassador said he had the impression we were going "into the soup" with the Iranians, i.e. we had signalled a willingness to support the EU-3's negotiating effort and the Iranians were seeking a higher price by threatening to resume enrichment activity. Ambassador commented that while we do not have a problem with the

development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, Iran had tried for years to hide a secret program. This raised obvious problems of Iran's credibility. Acquisition of a nuclear arms capability by Iran, Ambassador noted, would be very destabilizing for the region.

16. (C) Bedjaoui observed that the Iranian program went back to the 1960s, when the Shah had tried to purchase a reactor from France. Noting Ambassador's comment about Iran's lack of credibility, Bedjaoui asked the U.S. view of Israel's nuclear capability, which he termed "enormous." Ambassador responded that our position was that there should be universal adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Bedjaoui said it made no sense for Israel to have nuclear weapons since it could not use them against its neighbors without having the effects blow back on it. Ambassador said there was a matter of deterrence as well, but agreed the use of nuclear weapons by any country in the region would be catastrophic. Bedjaoui responded that the entire Middle East should be denuclearized.

U.S.-ALGERIAN RELATIONS/NEW EMBASSY COMPOUND

17. (C) Turning to U.S.-Algerian bilateral relations, Bedjaoui said he was "delighted" to see how closely our countries were working together, not just in the war on terrorism, but also economically and in other domains. He noted that the U.S. last year replaced France as Algeria's largest trading partner. Bedjaoui told Ambassador not to hesitate to let him know if there was anything he could do to improve the relationship. Ambassador expressed appreciation for the minister's comment, and underscored the importance of GOA support for our \$70 million project to build a new embassy compound. Our decision to build a new chancery reflected our confidence in Algeria and the growing importance of our relations. It would be important, Ambassador continued, to ensure that other ongoing issues, such as the current chancery lease discussions, be kept separate so as not to interfere with this important investment in our bilateral relationship. Bedjaoui assured Ambassador that the GOA was very pleased with the project and said he would help ensure it moved forward without delay.

JOINT MILITARY DIALOGUE

18. (C) Bedjaoui also noted the "excellent visit" of MOD Secretary General Senhadji, who had just returned from

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Washington where he headed the Algerian delegation to the inaugural Joint Military Dialogue. Ambassador said he had participated in the opening session of the JMD and thought Senhadji had made an excellent impression on Secretary Rumsfeld as well as on all the U.S. officials he saw, including members of Congress. Bedjaoui responded that Senhadji had been impressed that Secretary Rumsfeld had taken the time to meet him, despite the many crises with which Rumsfeld had to deal. Ambassador observed that the military ceremony at Arlington Cemetery had been particularly touching. Bedjaoui said while serving as Ambassador to France in the early 1970s, he had met many American veterans of the North Africa campaign, including members of Congress. He regretted that nothing had come of plans to hold a reunion in North Africa. Now it was probably too late due to the advanced age of most of the campaign's veterans.

19. (C) Comment: At this initial meeting, Bedjaoui went out of his way to present himself as a friend of the United States. Although he served as Minister of Justice in the first Algerian government in 1964, Bedjaoui's worldview is refreshingly current, distinctly unlike that of many members of the FLN old guard.

ERDMAN